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Wednesday, August 6, 2008

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State agencies must share their lessons to protect children

Posted by [The Bay City Times](#) August 06, 2008 06:50AM

A recently released audit that showed the Michigan Department of Human Services put thousands of children at risk by authorizing about 1,900 sex offenders and other "unsuitable" day-care providers between 2003 and 2006 has us wondering:

Why aren't our state agencies talking to one another?

The Michigan Department of Education had a similar problem starting in 2004, when a state audit revealed that educators with criminal histories were escaping detection in background checks. A public uproar followed and the Legislature passed a passle of new laws intended to protect children from child predators.

Now comes this more recent audit showing that our youngest children, entrusted to day-care providers, were left at risk.

In its response to the audit, the Department of Human Services said it quickly began more stringent background checks of day-care providers.

That's what we would expect.

Yet, state government shouldn't be so compartmentalized that some day-care providers with criminal histories were escaping detection at the same time that teachers' backgrounds were given close scrutiny.

It's obvious that state agencies haven't shared their experiences and solutions with one another, especially when it comes to checking the backgrounds of those who come into contact with the most vulnerable among us - our children.

State government needs to break down the walls that divide our state agencies from one another so each may take advantage of the experiences of the others.

Create a "shared solutions center" or some such.

Every agency should use it often, for problems other state agencies face, and how they are working to solve them.

What we have here is a failure to communicate.

The solution for state agencies ought to involve a lesson that we teach even our youngest children.

Sharing.



Other View: State's day care nightmare

August 06, 2008 10:04 am

Michigan put thousands of children at risk by authorizing people with serious criminal records to provide day care. A recent auditor general report says 1,900 convicts passed background checks from 2003 to 2006 that failed to flag them as unsuitable child care providers. ...

The state, appropriately, has beefed up its background check process. Auditors should go back and test those changes to make sure they are working. ...

More than 400 of the 1,900 convicts approved as day care providers had histories of child abuse and neglect. Another 31 were registered sex offenders. A check of the state's sex offender registry would have turned up those names. Similarly, a check of the Corrections Department's online inmate and parolee list would have flagged the inmate names. ...

Using multiple resources for background checks makes sense. That should provide a more comprehensive report. It also should make it easier to do monthly checks to flag people who pass initial muster ...

-- Grand Rapids Press

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Wednesday, August 6, 2008

Athlete guilty in infant's death

Commerce Twp. teenager who hid pregnancy on college volleyball team faces up to 20 years for killing baby.

Doug Guthrie / The Detroit News

A Commerce Township teen hid her pregnancy when reporting last summer to play volleyball on a scholarship at a Pennsylvania college, but on Tuesday, Teri Rhodes pleaded guilty to voluntary manslaughter and now faces up to 20 years in prison for suffocating her newborn daughter.

Rhodes, 19, posted \$25,000 bond after entering her plea before Erie County Judge William Cunningham and was allowed to return home to Michigan. She must return to Erie, Pa., on the shore of Lake Erie about halfway between Cleveland and Buffalo in November to be sentenced. Under Pennsylvania law, Rhodes' sentencing guidelines may be as low as two years.

"She was a good student, a scholarship athlete with a wonderful background. It's heartbreaking," Erie County District Attorney Bradley Foulk said. "This is one of those cases where no matter what I did, a substantial segment of the community will disagree with me, but this was an appropriate resolution."

The plea was a bargain with the prosecutor in exchange for dropping a first-degree homicide charge that in Pennsylvania carries a life sentence.

Police found the dead infant on Aug. 12, 2007, wrapped in a plastic bag inside a bathroom at Rhodes' Mercyhurst College campus apartment. The county coroner ruled the death a homicide, but couldn't determine if the child asphyxiated before or after being placed in the sack.

Rhodes claimed she didn't know she was pregnant. She denied giving birth to a doctor the next day when she sought treatment for bleeding at a hospital, Foulk said. Later, she told a detective the infant was stillborn. The coroner said the baby lived about 10 minutes.

"We believed there was intent, that she had the intent to kill the child," Foulk said.

The infant, later named Theresa, was born full term at more than seven pounds.

Rhodes, who stands about 5 feet, 3 inches tall and weights about 110 pounds, claimed to have taken a sports physical that didn't find her pregnancy the day before the birth. Rhodes said she had been cleared to participate in light workouts with her Mercyhurst volleyball teammates.

However, investigators said they discovered Rhodes had been researching pregnancy on her laptop computer long before the birth.

"I doubt we will ever know exactly what went on in this young girl's mind," Foulk said.

"Fortunately, I have never seen a case like this in 20 years as the prosecutor here, and I hope to never see one like this again."

Rhodes lawyer in Erie, Phil Friedman, described his client as, "19-years-old going on 15. She's a nice kind of quiet kid, a good athlete and a good student who is very religious. She has three sisters and parents who have been very supportive, but it's an awful situation."

Erie Police Lt. Ken Merchant, one of the investigators on the case, said the worst part is, "There was another way out."

Both Michigan and Pennsylvania have laws to that allow unwanted infants to be given to authorities for adoption within days of birth, no questions asked.

"She could have taken her to any hospital, fire station or police department and nobody would have found out about it, not the school, her parents, nobody," Merchant said.

"That's the tragedy of this."

You can reach Doug Guthrie at (313) 222-2548 or dguthrie@detnews.com.

Find this article at:

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Macomb teacher arraigned on sex acts charges

BY AMBER HUNT • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • AUGUST 6, 2008

A South Lake High School teacher was arraigned this morning on charges she engaged in sex acts with two different, current male students on June 26.

Melissa Lavender, 33, stood mute to the charges of fourth-degree criminal sexual conduct. St. Clair Shores Police said the incident happened on a former student's parents' boat that was docked in a St. Clair Shores marina.

Lavender's lawyer, Mike Dennis, waived the formal arraignment, meaning that the allegations were not spelled out before Judge Joseph Oster this morning in the 40th District Court in St. Clair Shores.

Dennis said Lavender has strong backing in the community and that some members of the school board attended the morning arraignment.

He called the charges an abomination.

"It's completely out of character for her."

St. Clair Shores Det. Harold Bergeron said alcohol is believed to have played a part in the alleged crime.

He said there were eight former and current students on the boat. Lavender was the only teacher. A witness came forward just last week and told police Lavender had inappropriately touched two of the current students. The alleged victims are 16 and 17, respectively.

Lavender has taught culinary arts for six years at the high school in St. Clair Shores, but now is suspended. She is married with two young children.

She was released today on a personal bond. She's to undergo alcohol breath testing four times a day and will reappear in court Aug. 26 for an exam conference.

Students testify they saw teacher sneak a camera under skirt of 15-year-old

Posted by [Barton Deiters | The Grand Rapids Press](#) August 05, 2008
17:11PM

Categories: [Breaking News](#), [Top Stories](#)



Press Photo/Emily Zoladz Former Byron Center High School teacher Steven Sanger listens to a witness Tuesday during the first day of his trial for allegedly taking pictures up the skirts of students.

GRAND RAPIDS -- Four Byron Center High School students, including the accuser, testified Tuesday that they saw teacher Steven Sanger sneak a camera under the skirt of a 15-year-old in June 2007, with one girl saying she saw the photo.

Sanger is charged with trying to snap a photo of the ninth-grader's panties while she stood at his desk discussing her failing science grade.

The accuser, now 17, testified along with her two teenage male friends Alex Cooke and Jake Wensel. The three gave substantially identical testimony, saying Sanger was sitting forward with the camera in his palm as the girl stood nearby.

They said Sanger seemed to be making an effort to manipulate the camera beneath the girl's knee-length skirt.

"I grabbed the skirt with my left hand and tried to pull it close to me so it didn't flair out so much," the weepy girl told the jury in Kent County Circuit Court. "I tried to move away."

Each witness recalled being dismayed and believed the girl should report the activity to school authorities, which she did.

Each also told defense attorney Daniel Watkins there was no beef with Sanger, regardless of the lousy grades he was giving out and the fact that he had banned Wensel's then-girlfriend from entering the room.

The girl's friend, Jenna Maleport, said she was standing on the other side of Sanger during the alleged incident and saw what she believed was a video image of the accuser's panties and legs. She said she demanded the camera from Sanger numerous times so she could get a better look at the image, but he refused to give it to her.

She said she saw Sanger monkeying with the camera, then he gave it to her. At that point, she said she could not find the image.

"I know I saw it," Maleport said under cross examination from Watkins.

But when questioned for a second time by Assistant Prosecutor Helen Brinkman, Maleport was asked to demonstrate how Sanger took the photo at an angle that allowed the friend to see the image on the back of the camera.

Maleport held the camera in a way that would have the lens pointing either at the floor or at an angle that could not have captured the accuser's panties.

Brinkman conceded in her opening statement police had not found the picture of the accuser in this case, but they did find other "up-skirt" photos Brinkman claims were shot in his classroom.

In a search of Sanger's home and office, police also found commercial pornography in addition to the photos, Brinkman said.

More than 50 people on each side of this case crowded the courtroom Tuesday in a trial that continues with more testimony today.

E-mail Barton Deiters: bdeiters@qpress.com

Grandfpa shoots boy while aiming for dog

BY TAMMY STABLES BATTAGLIA • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • August 6, 2008

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A 9-year-old west-side Detroit boy is recovering from a gunshot wound to his leg after his 60-year-old grandfather shot a pit bull dog attacking the youth this morning, according to police.

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The bullet went through the dog and hit the boy in the thigh at 7:50 a.m., a Detroit Police spokeswoman said.

He was taken from the home in the 18000 block of Plainview to a local hospital, the spokeswoman said.

The dog was gone when a Detroit Animal Control officer arrived at the scene, chief animal control officer Harry Ward said.

“We looked for the dog and were told by people in the area they took it to a vet, we don’t know where,” Ward said. “The police have given us information, which we have given to one of our officers who will follow up. We will follow up.”

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COMMUTATION FROM GRANHOLM

Granholt order to set convicted killer free Sept. 2

Woman had been sentenced to life

BY DAVID ASHENFELTER and KORIE WILKINS • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS • August 6, 2008

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An Oakland County woman who has spent nearly 11 years in prison for killing her ex-boyfriend will be released next month, after Gov. Jennifer Granholm commuted her sentence.

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Kylleen Hargrave-Thomas, 56, is scheduled to be released Sept. 2 from the Robert Scott Correctional Facility in Plymouth and will be on parole for four years, Russ Marlan, spokesman for the Michigan Department of Corrections, said Tuesday.

Liz Boyd, spokeswoman for Granholm, said Tuesday the commutation was approved July 24 at the recommendation of the parole board. Executive staff, Boyd said, reviewed the parole board's recommendation and determined Hargrave-Thomas does not pose a risk to public safety.

"And that's supported by her record," Boyd said.

The news was cheered by Hargrave-Thomas' lawyer and criticized by the ex-wife of the victim.

"Kylleen's intention is to live a quiet, productive life and continue to work at Grace Centers of Hope" in Pontiac "as a counselor," her lawyer, Andrea Lyon, a DePaul University Law School professor, said on Tuesday.

She and her client insist that Hargrave-Thomas is innocent.

In a commutation, the punishment for a crime is reduced. A pardon excuses or forgives the crime. This year, Granholm has approved 25 commutations, Boyd said.

Hargrave-Thomas of Bloomfield Hills was found guilty of first-degree murder after a bench trial in 1993 in the 1991 stabbing of Joseph Bernal, 42, in the bedroom of his Westland home.

A prosecutor argued that Hargrave-Thomas was enraged because Bernal had decided not to marry her.

She was sentenced to life in prison.

Bernal's ex-wife said the family is upset about the commutation and believes Granholm approved it because Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., sent a letter to the governor recommending it.

She said Levin also sent a representative to a parole board hearing last year to recommend the commutation.

"It's a political move and why Sen. Carl Levin got involved, we don't know," Susan Bernal said Tuesday.

Levin's spokeswoman, Tara Andringa, said Tuesday that Levin did send a letter to Granholm.

In an e-mailed statement, Levin said he wrote the letter after reading statements by U.S. District Judge Paul Gadola, who wrote that Hargrave-Thomas was likely innocent of the crime and didn't receive effective counsel.

Gadola overturned the verdict in 2002 and ordered Hargrave-Thomas released from prison, saying her trial attorneys had done a poor job of representing her and he expressed doubts about whether she was guilty. Family members insist she committed the crime.

Gadola ordered her to return to prison two years ago after the U.S. 6th Circuit Court of Appeals, in a 2-1 decision, overturned his ruling, saying Hargrave-Thomas' initial appellate lawyers had failed early on to raise the ineffective assistance of counsel claim.

Marlan said Hargrave-Thomas has been cited only once for misconduct while incarcerated, for being out of place -- a minor infraction.

Contact **DAVID ASHENFELTER** at dashenfelter@freepress.com.

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Wednesday, August 6, 2008

Gov to free woman convicted in '91 murder

George Hunter / The Detroit News

PLYMOUTH -- For 15 years, Kylleen Hargrave-Thomas told anyone who would listen that she was innocent of murdering her ex-boyfriend.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm finally listened.

Hargrave-Thomas, 56, who served nearly 11 years for the murder of her ex-boyfriend, is scheduled to be released from the Scott Correctional Facility in Plymouth on Sept. 2, after Granholm commuted her first-degree murder sentence July 24. The decision was announced Tuesday.

"This is very good news," said Hargrave-Thomas' son, Nevill Hargrave-Thomas, 32, of Wixom. "We're very happy."

Others contend Granholm bowed to political pressure after refusing to give the woman clemency in 2005.

Hargrave-Thomas' defenders say Joseph Bernal had a drinking problem and perhaps enemies, but offered no theory about who stabbed him in the heart in 1991 and torched his Westland home.

"She did it," said Susan Bernal, his ex-wife. "She did this crime."

The commutation was the 21st by the governor in 2008. Since taking office, Granholm has commuted 43 sentences, spokeswoman Liz Boyd said. Ten of this year's commutations were for prisoners serving sentences for first-degree murder, and one was for second-degree murder. In 2007, Granholm commuted the sentences of two convicted murderers, both of whom were terminally ill.

Before that, Granholm commuted no murder sentences.

The commutation, which places Hargrave-Thomas on probation and does not erase her conviction, brings to a close a nationally watched case. She was free for four years when a judge found serious problems with her 1993 trial, but returned to prison after an appeals court overturned the ruling.

"We're very grateful to Gov. Granholm for righting the injustice in this case," said Hargrave-Thomas' attorney Andrea Lyon, a professor at the DePaul University Law School in Chicago, whose students researched the case and found what Lyon called "major problems" with the conviction.

Hargrave-Thomas wasn't available for comment Tuesday, but told The Detroit News in 2001 that "I've missed my sons' teen-age years, their graduations, the birth of my grandson."

"These are parts of my life that are gone," she said. "Those are moments that I'll never get back, ever."

Prosecutors argued Hargrave-Thomas stabbed Bernal, 42, because she was angry over his refusal to

marry her. She was sentenced to life in prison without parole.

But Lyon said Hargrave-Thomas' attorneys, who took the case for free, did not do their job.

"They admitted on the stand that they didn't do any work in the case," Lyon said. "They didn't file one motion. They didn't call one witness."

One attorney, Rene Cooper, had his license suspended last year after he was convicted of indecent exposure.

Rusty Hills, spokesman for Attorney General Mike Cox, said the case did not meet the standards for commutation.

"For commutations in first-degree murder cases, there's a certain criteria that needs to apply: Either the person needs to be close to death, or incapacitated to the point where he or she can't commit the same crime again," Hills said. "This case doesn't meet that standard."

Susan Bernal called Granholm's decision "political."

"I'm really upset," she said. "(U.S. Sen.) Carl Levin's office got involved in this, and sent a letter to Granholm that is almost identical to the petition for commutation. That's not a coincidence."

The letters contain several similarities. Both, for instance, erroneously list the murder date as Oct. 11, 1989, according to copies obtained by The News.

Levin was not available for comment.

Couple split for a few months

Hargrave-Thomas began dating Bernal in the spring of 1991. The couple split for several months because of his drinking problem, Hargrave-Thomas told The News in 2001. She said they reunited after he promised to stop drinking.

The relationship was going well, Hargrave-Thomas said. A few weeks after they reunited, Bernal surprised her with roses, a gold bracelet and concert tickets for her 40th birthday.

Then, about 7 a.m. on Oct. 11, a neighbor spotted smoke billowing out of Bernal's bedroom window and called 911. Firefighters found Bernal's motionless body lying in his bed. Investigators noted there was no forced entry.

Hargrave-Thomas was the chief suspect from the beginning, according to police records. A fake thumbnail was found in her car, and investigators deduced she had broken it when she stabbed Bernal.

Seven months after the murder, a woman who lived near Bernal said she saw Hargrave-Thomas driving by his house about 5 a.m. the day of the murder.

Lyon, while she was a University of Michigan professor, also uncovered new information about the murder with the help of her students, including lab reports that found no blood on Hargrave-Thomas' clothes, shoes or car.

The lab reports were missing from police files and were not admitted as evidence at trial.

Clemency request made

Hargrave-Thomas walked free from prison in 2002 after a U.S. District Judge Paul Gadola ordered a new trial.

But in 2006, he sent her back after his decision was reversed and Hargrave-Thomas exhausted her appeals.

One included a request for clemency in 2005 by Granholm, who cited the Parole Board's recommendation in nixing the bid.

Last month, the Parole Board recommended the commutation, Boyd said.

Lyon said Hargrave-Thomas looks forward to putting her life back together.

"I'll be very happy to see her walk out that door," Lyon said.

You can reach George Hunter at (313) 222-2134 or ghunter@detnews.com.

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Police: Bay City couple victims of murder-suicide

Posted by [Crystal McMorris | The Bay City Times](#) August 06, 2008 08:36AM

Categories: [Breaking News](#), [Courts and cops](#), [Top Stories](#)

On Friday, David H. Hetzel mailed a letter to family members, police say, apologizing for what he was prepared to do.

When he and his wife, Sharron, both 56, strolled into the Third Street Waterfall Park for a steel drum concert that evening, they held hands, observers say.

Nobody who saw them would have guessed that in a few hours, just as the sun would rise over Bay City, darkness and violence would consume the seemingly happy couple.

According to Bay City Police, who wrapped up their investigation on Tuesday, David Hetzel committed a series of crimes Saturday morning that left his wife and himself dead and their home at 406 N. Farragut St. destroyed by fire.

According to investigators, this is how the tragedy unfolded in the early morning hours on Saturday:

David Hetzel armed himself with two chef's knives and what police believe was a golf club and attacked Sharron as she lay in bed, striking her in the head and stabbing her repeatedly.

He then dashed through the Victorian home, from which they were being evicted, starting fires in several locations and setting a large blaze in the basement.

He gulped smoke as he climbed the stairs to the second-story bedroom a final time, slipped into bed beside his dead or dying wife, and picked up one of the knives. With one swift motion, he inflicted a single, fatal wound to his torso.

Such are the conclusions of investigators from the Bay City Police Department.

Detectives - along with arson specialists from the Michigan State Police and the Bay County Medical Examiner - have been piecing the evidence together since Saturday morning.

"For whatever reason, he killed his wife and committed suicide," said Bay City Police Chief Michael J. Cecchini. "It's a tragedy."

The "how" seems to have been explained, but the "why" remains a mystery, the chief said.

Bay City firefighters and police officers arrived at the house around 6:45 a.m. and found the doors locked, according to Detective Sgt. Joseph A. Lanava.

Officers forced a rear door open as firefighters busted in the front door. Fire personnel discovered the couple in an upstairs bedroom, and removed both bodies through a bedroom window.

Both of the Hetzels were pronounced dead at the scene, and autopsy results later showed that Sharron died of "multiple stab wounds and blunt force trauma to the back of her head," and that David died from a "single stab wound on his torso."

David Hetzel was a chef who had worked for the former Holiday Inn hotel in Bay City before opening The Really Darn Good Food Company in downtown Bay City in 2006.

The restaurant closed earlier this year and David Hetzel was attempting to launch a catering business. Sharron Hetzel was executive director of Studio 23/The Arts Center until resigning in June, and previously worked as an administrator for the Girl Scouts of Mitten Bay. The couple is survived by two adult daughters and a grandson.

Cecchini said he has not seen the letter that David Hetzel wrote to his daughters, and is unsure if it provides insight into his state of mind.

"He does make some apologies," Cecchini said.

Joy Butler, director of the Bay Arts Council, said that Sharron Hetzel was an "effervescent" woman who loved art, children and laughter.

"Sharron was just fun," Butler said. "She had a great sense of humor and a real flair, both in her personal taste and in what she looked for in art."

Butler said she's spoken to the Hetzels' twin daughters, Kristin and Bre, who are in their late 20s, and they are "doing as well as could be expected."

"It's not easy," Butler said. "We had some tears today."

Kristin resides in Bay City and has a young son, Austin. Bre is on Mackinac Island for the summer, where she is working as a chef, Butler said.

The Hetzels had lost their home to foreclosure and also had filed for bankruptcy protection but did not follow through with the Chapter 13 proceedings.

Butler said the Hetzels seemed to care deeply for one another, and that she witnessed them holding hands at the park Friday evening.

"I really hope that people support the girls and I hope they remember the good things," Butler said, "because there were a lot of good things."

Funeral services are scheduled for 11 a.m. Saturday at Westminster Presbyterian Church, 103 E. Midland St. Visitation will be from 1-9 p.m. Friday at the Squires Funeral Home, 211 N. Henry St.

Sharon Hetzel is the third woman slain on the East Side of Bay City since June. The body of Pamela Wilson, 37, was found in an upstairs apartment at 310 Garfield Ave. on June 16. Christopher K. Wilson, 25, has been charged with an open count of murder but has been deemed incompetent to stand trial and is undergoing psychiatric treatment.

Holly Falasz, 29, was found dead in her home at 318 Jennison St. on July 25. Her children, ages 5 months, 4 and 8 years old, were home but unharmed in the attack.

Police Chief Cecchini said that case is a homicide and that it appears the killer remains at large, though he said he does not believe the killer poses a threat to the general public.

Times Writer Patti Brandt contributed to this report.

Abraham in court today on traffic charge

Korie Wilkins • Free Press Staff Writer • August 6, 2008

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Convicted killer Nathaniel Abraham is scheduled to appear in a Rochester Hills court this afternoon on a misdemeanor charge of driving on a suspended license.

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Abraham, 22, is also facing felony drug charges.

According to authorities, Abraham was stopped in Auburn Hills May 28 for not wearing a seatbelt. They discovered his license was suspended. On May 30, he was arrested in Pontiac and officers said they found a bag containing tablets of the drug Ecstasy.

Abraham's attorney, Byron Pitts, could not immediately be reached for comment.

An Oakland County judge ruled last month that Abraham will stand trial on the felony drug charges. If convicted, he could face up to 20 years in prison.

Abraham was convicted in 1999 of second-degree murder in the 1997 killing of Pontiac resident Ronnie Greene Jr. He was released in 2007.

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Your Opinions

AUGUST 6, 2008

New child support fee is outrageous

I have just received a letter from the Michigan Department of Human Services, that beginning September 2008, Michigan will start collecting a \$25 yearly fee from the custodial parent for child support cases that meet certain criteria. The letter states that this is due to the Federal Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, Social Security Act, Section 454(6)(B)(ii), to "help pay for the services provided by the child support program." In most cases, administrative fees are already paid to Friend of the Court with the regular payment.

I have read many comments from various sources regarding people should think twice before having kids, or having kids out of marriage, or divorcing, or that the other parent should pay. This is not the real issue. The bottom line is the federal government is taking money intended for our children, to reduce the federal deficit. *Outrageous* ! I never thought I would see the day, in this country, that government would take food out of our children's mouths, but it appears this is the case. Shame on our legislators for allowing this to happen. I will be contacting them. I hope others will as well.

Michele Jordan

Marshall

www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-ap-mi-campforrefugees,0,672808.story

chicagotribune.com

Summer camp near Detroit aims to help refugees

Associated Press

11:17 AM CDT, August 3, 2008

REDFORD TOWNSHIP, Mich.

An organization that helps refugees has created a summer camp in Wayne County for people who recently have arrived in the United States from war-torn countries such as Iraq.

About 150 refugees, including children and adults, have been attending the camp organized by Southfield-based Lutheran Social Services of Michigan. The camp wraps up its first year this week.

"It's helping me with the language," Halah Abdul-Kareem, a 14-year-old who lived in Iraq and moved to Dearborn in May, told the Detroit Free Press for a story published Sunday. "I need the help."

Lutheran Social Services hopes to expand the camp in future years. Most of the camp's participants this year are from Iraq, with about 20 Hmong refugees from Southeast Asia joining them.

On one recent day, kids played on the basketball court while their parents learned English in a classroom inside a YWCA facility in suburban Detroit. The day's lesson was about how to buy fruits and vegetables in English.

Some refugees from Iraq have settled in Dearborn, where a large number of people who trace their roots to the Middle East makes everyday life easier. Halah's family has been able to shop, dine and look for jobs while speaking Arabic.

"What I found in my country, I find it here" in Dearborn, said her father, Mustafa Majeed. "It makes the new life easier."

Camp organizers say participants have shown determination.

"They're eager to learn -- they get here early," said Jessica Cotton, a senior coordinator for the camp. "You can see it."

Information from: Detroit Free Press, <http://www.freep.com>

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Wednesday, August 6, 2008

United Way plans \$10M initiative to curb Detroit-area dropout rates

Shawn D. Lewis / The Detroit News

SOUTHFIELD -- The United Way for Southeastern Michigan launched an unprecedented \$10 million initiative Monday aimed at improving high school dropout rates throughout the region.

During a press conference at Lawrence Technological Institute, AT&T Michigan announced a \$1 million contribution to the United Way for Southeastern Michigan Greater Detroit Area Venture Fund. The fund was created to support school turnaround efforts in high schools with dropout rates of 40 percent or higher.

"We've already accumulated \$4 million toward this goal, and we're looking to create small schools with personalized learning environments where students can flourish," said Mike Brennan, president and CEO of United Way for Southeastern Michigan. Brennan said a Johns Hopkins University study showed there are 2,000 high schools in the country that have graduated less than 60 percent of their freshmen class for three consecutive years, and more than 30 of those are in Southeastern Michigan.

Among those targeted for help include schools in Detroit, Hazel Park, Lincoln Park, Melvindale, Allen Park, Pontiac, River Rouge, Ecorse, Redford, Hamtramck and Eastpointe.

Detroit Public Schools Superintendent Connie Calloway said her district welcomes the help.

"We have an urgent need in Michigan, and this shows foresight and community planning along with philanthropic organizations," Calloway said. "We've been working together for 13 months and I think this is a magnificent opportunity."

Although Hazel Park school officials are grateful for any help that could improve graduation rates, the district wants to see exactly what that help will involve.

"We would welcome substantive, concrete help that would improve our graduation rate, but we need more details about brass tacks and nuts and bolts," said Michael Barlow, director of curriculum for the district. "If less than 100 percent of our students are graduating, it's not good enough. One hundred percent is a lofty goal, but difficulty in achieving a lofty goal never diminished its value."

Gail Torreano, president of AT&T Michigan, said she hopes other corporations will donate to help improve schools in the region.

You can reach Shawn D. Lewis at (248) 647-8825 or slewis@detnews.com .

Friday is deadline to sign up for free backpacks for kids

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BY ROBYN PANGI

Family Talk Magazine
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KALAMAZOO -- Expenses are on the rise -- food and fuel being the biggest burden. Those day-to-day needs might put back-to-school shopping on the back burner. But there is help for families who need school supplies for their students in grades pre-kindergarten through eighth.

The Kalamazoo Deacons Conference is coordinating an annual distribution of free backpacks stuffed with school supplies.

Families may receive up to four backpacks apiece, but they must register in advance -- and soon. Friday is the last day to sign up for the giveaway.

Individuals can register at any Family Health Center or at the Kalamazoo Deacons Conference.

Each family is then to claim its backpacks at the Back-to-School Bash, scheduled for 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Aug. 15 at LaCrone Park on Kalamazoo's northern end. There is no admission charge.

The Kalamazoo Deacons Conference, working with the Family Health Centers, Junior Girls Club, Great Clips and the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Kalamazoo, is putting on the bash.

The day features lunch, kids' games, face painting, immunizations and vision screenings.

Pre-registration is not required for the bash, only for the backpacks.

The Kalamazoo Deacons Conference has been involved in the event for six years, and in that time it has not seen a lag in demand.

Fortunately, "along with an increase in demand, we have noticed that more people are doing this type of program," said Elisha Young, the agency's program director.

Young also said more people are volunteering with the bash.

"Our goal is to help people in need, and this is a great way for the community to come together" as well, Young said. "We are so blessed."

Family Talk, a sister publication of the Kalamazoo Gazette, appears in the paper the first Friday of every month.

Where to sign up for backpacks

Family Health Center
117 W. Paterson St., Kalamazoo
349-4257

Family Health Center
2030 Portage Road, Kalamazoo
349-0888

Family Health Center
325 Centre St., Portage
488-7342

Kalamazoo Deacons Conference
1010 N. Westnedge Ave.,
Kalamazoo
344-7333

To help

Volunteers are needed to stuff the backpacks in the days leading up to the distribution. Call Joni at 344-7333, ext. 13.